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Religion and religious movements – strategies and adaptation to new landscape

Introduction

Stéphane Ancel and Hassan Mwakimako

Religious movements are not governed solely by tradition or by immutable rules that they are charged to perpetuate. Of course, tradition represents the foundation on which religious movements build their legitimacy. And it provides a framework with which members can think about the past, the present and the future. Nevertheless, religious movements and their followers are obliged to act, react and adapt because of the political and social contexts of the places and territories in which they are installed.

First of all, it seems obvious to say that their social, political and economic involvement depends on the dialogue established with the State. The latter is eager to establish rules and norms in religious matters, which obviously have immediate repercussions on the lives of the faithful. Thus, the methods used and in use by the states in the Horn of Africa to manage the question of religion remain a fundamental and relevant issue. But is it necessary to restrict the analysis to the State's view of religion and religious institutions?

Let's insist on the term 'dialogue' that we used above. This term allows us to stress that religious movements and their followers are not passive witnesses to the vagaries of politics. Indeed, religious movements are not subject to the State's decisions without reacting, and they are not excluded from decision-making on religious policies. As a result, each religious movement is obliged to propose a vision of the State, one discourse on the role of the State in religious life and another on the role of the faithful in the social and political frameworks. Whether the religious movement is in opposition to or in line with the regulations and policies defined by authorities (e.g. the so called 'shari'a laws' in Sudan, or secularism in Ethiopia and Eritrea) determines the level and the form of negotiation, or conflict, between religious and state's agents. These cooperation, negotiations or conflicts can happen within formal institutions gathering government and religious representatives, or outside such institutions when these spaces are not considered legitimate anymore (demonstrations, coup d'état, civil war, intermittent and multifaceted resistances).

[Page 408] We must not forget that religious movements are not ‘closed islands’ that are not subject to external influences. They live within a political and social space offering constraints and freedoms and it is indispensable that they be able to manipulate these constraints and freedoms in order to be able to establish themselves and develop sustainably. They must also be able to propose solutions and strategies to their followers facing the political, economic and social uncertainties on the one hand, and alternatives to solutions possibly proposed by competitive religious organisations on the other, as followers are not followers forever and may have the agency to shift their affiliation, depending on the changing contexts and constraints. Religious movements, therefore, have to adapt to the State and other religious communities that share political and social spaces with them. Indeed, whether a religious movement acts, through the intermediary of the State or not (and whether this action has repercussions at the local, national or inter/transnational levels), the other movements on a territory are required to react accordingly. Leaders of religious movements may be reluctant to recognise the influence of other religious movements on their policies. Yet, religious movements interact with each other, even if often unwillingly.

And so, they establish strategies to ensure their survival, but also their rise and expansion. For the religious movements don’t just adapt; they also act. And when they act, they are not only governed by a survival instinct. They propose, they establish new rules, they are bearers of innovation, both in societal and political matters. In this, they are transformed; they evolve. Even if, here again, their leaders and followers avoid admitting it publicly, religious movements are also innovating in what constitutes them.

The following chapters are obviously not intended to provide an exhaustive overview of the situations experienced by all religious groups in all the states of the Horn of Africa. Nor will the reader find a history of religious movements’ settlements and their evolutions – though the reader will find many recommendations for further readings to explore. However, they draw historical contexts and offer precise analyses, reflecting the complexity of the processes leading to the involvement of religious movements in the contemporary political and civil lives of states and citizens. Our objective is thus clear: to give readers the means, thanks to the case studies presented in this collection, to understand the role of these religious movements in this part of the world, considering their capacity to innovate, to adapt to the context, to propose political and social alternatives, but also with regard to their tendency to evolve, to change including to ‘radicalize’ (a term to be used cautiously), because of the very dialogue with the State and the different social and political institutions. These chapters demonstrate eloquently that religious movements and their followers are not passive witnesses to political and social vagaries, but rather dynamic actors.

This part opens with perhaps the most striking example: Somalia. As Mohamed Husein Gaas & Markus Virgil Hoehne’s chapter (‘Political Islam in Somalia: From underground movements to the rise and continued resilience of Al Shabaab’) shows, following the regime ‘collapse’, it was indeed the religious movements (Islamist agendas till then marginalised or oppressed) that proposed a new form of order, where the previous one no longer existed, with a clear desire to set themselves up as an ersatz of the State. Heir to the profound changes that Somali Islam has undergone but far from being the ‘natural’ candidates to head of state, the religious movements – here the Islamic Courts and eventually the organisation Al Shabaab – have adapted ‘to the demand’, reacted and acted according to the context, as the authors note: ‘pragmatically and to some degree accommodate(d) clan-political considerations’. Indeed, once at the head of the State, the movement must enter into dialogue with the pre-existing social and political structures, while navigating in a national and international context which it knows how to take advantage of.

[Page 409] The vagaries of al Shabaab movements are not confined to Somalia; rather, they cross borders and this discussion is brought to light in the chapter by Hassan Mwakimako and Justin Willis ('Islam, politics and violence on the Kenyan Coast') which highlights the role of religiously instigated political violence showcased by the involvement of Al Shabaab in the coast of Kenya. Beginning with a terrorist attack on the small town of Mpeketoni, the chapters discuss the complexity and the ambiguities of the moment of religious violence to reveal a window of the complex relationship between developments in Islam at the coast and in Kenya more widely, the coast's place in wider movements of political Islam, and patterns of secular grievance and political ambition which also drive violence. This chapter argues that an intersection of multiple factors makes the Kenya coast particularly volatile but goes to show how the weakness of the Kenyan state has provided a favourable environment for acts of terror; equally importantly, Kenya's national politics have normalised and vulgarised religiously instigated violence.

And if Somalia and Kenya experiences with Al Shabaab show a complex relationship, the Sudan is often presented as a perfect example of the alliance between religious and political movements, the chapters of Azza Mustafa Ahmed ("Islamic movement" in Sudan: From the NIF to the December Revolution) and Barbara Casciarri ('Islamic Law, Legal Hybridity and Legal Practices in Sudan') allow us to qualify this opinion. As Azza Mustafa Ahmed's chapter shows, this alliance was not without conflict and ambiguity, between the declared objective and the results obtained. The so-called Islamic movement itself is a complex and changing movement from its origin until today, be it in its members, ideas, objectives or the instruments it has used to access and reshape the State. Indeed, the dialogue between religious and political movements has fuelled all kinds of controversies and personal quarrels, leading to a more general contestation of the role of religion in the country's affairs, until the popular revolution of December 2018 that can be interpreted, as the author does, as a revolution against political Islam. Barbara Casciarri's chapter also helps to balance the place of religion and in the Sudanese society. Thus, she reminds us that, on the legal level, religious principles often had to be adapted to local traditions and conditions, and thus challenge the idea of a totally Islamised legal Sudanese society.

In Uganda and Ethiopia, religion is a re-emerging theme in the public debate. Indeed, it is a theme that has captured the attention of politicians as well as civil society. As Anna Fichtmüller's chapter shows ("For God and my Country". Religious Lobby Groups in Uganda and their Role in Policy Making'), we should not underestimate the role of the various religious movements in Uganda in the enactment of an anti-homosexuality law. Through their capacity to mobilise, religious movements have gained prominence in the public debate and, through the pressure they exert on them, are pushing politicians to bring religious considerations into government decisions. In a reverse process, in Ethiopia, Eloi Ficquet's chapter ('The Civil Rights Movement of Ethiopian Muslims in 2012: Historical Grounds and Driving Forces') shows us that the fact of seizing a religious issue doesn't guarantee success for the State and politicians. By claiming the right to promote a particular branch of Islam, in line with the objectives and prejudices of the Ethiopian government, the latter had to face a great wave of protest from the country's Muslim organisations. If this strategy of this former government proved that the use of religious themes may have been very hazardous for the State, this has obviously not prevented the current Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed from using them. As Jörg Hausteiner and Dereje Feyssa's chapter shows ("The Strains of 'Pente' Politics: Evangelicals and the Post-Orthodox State in Ethiopia"), his mandate marks a real turning point in Ethiopian political-religious life by putting an end to a succession of ostensibly secular governments, including presenting himself as a religious saviour.

[Page 410] If we move our focus from the State to the religious movements and their followers, the latter must, in addition to the political context, adapt to the confessional context of the country in which they are implanted, in order to ensure visibility, defend a position and/or ensure their development. As Stéphane Ancel's chapter shows ('Architectural innovation of Ethiopian Orthodox Church'), the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had to adapt and evolve, despite its privileged position in Ethiopia. The construction of the cathedrals is the symptom of an assumed policy of 'modernization' (aimed at strengthening its position at the local and national levels), but also of a deeper change linked to the influence of the other religious communities present in Ethiopia. And what if you represent a very minority group? As Netsereab G. Adom's chapter discusses ('Singing in Praise of Jesus in an "Islamic State": The challenges faced by *Habash* Pentecostalist Migrants in Sudan'), minority groups can be subject to the ambiguities of State policy on religious plurality. Between proclaimed acceptance and respect, and the reality of minority experiences, there is often a big gap.